

Message Text

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PAGE 01 VALLET 02687 01 OF 04 211138Z POSS DUPE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 VALLETTA 02687

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT
SUBJECT: MINTOFF'S MALTA: NEEDED REFORMS OR GROWING
- OPPRESSION

REF: VALLETTA 735 (DTG 311419Z MAR 78)

1. THE EMBASSY HAS PREPARED AN UPDATE OF ITS ASSESSMENT OF MINTOFF'S DOMESTIC PROGRAM AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY IN MALTA (SEE REFTEL) WHICH WILL BE SUBMITTED BY AIRGRAM. THE FOLLOWING IS A SUMMARY OF THAT REPORT, WHICH THE AMBASSADOR CLEARED IN SUBSTANCE BEFORE HIS DEPARTURE.

2. MINTOFF'S REFORM PROGRAM CONTINUES - TWO CONTROVERSIAL
- LAWS

CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 02 VALLET 02687 01 OF 04 211138Z POSS DUPE

- - DURING THE PAST FEW MONTHS PARLIAMENT HAS PASSED TWO CONTROVERSIAL ACTS, ONE DEALING WITH REFORM OF MALTA'S UNIVERSITY SYSTEM AND THE OTHER AN AMENDMENT TO THE PRESS LAW. ON UNIVERSITY REFORM, THE BASIC EFFECT OF MINTOFF'S CHANGES WILL BE TO INCREASE GREATLY THE DEGREE OF GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT IN UNIVERSITY AFFAIRS, FROM SELECTION OF FACULTY AND STUDENTS TO FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT. HIS ONLY

CONCESSIONS FROM HIS ORIGINAL PROPOSALS WERE TO ALLOW THE "OLD" UNIVERSITY TO RETAIN ITS IDENTITY AND TO CONTINUE TO GRANT DEGREES IN THE HUMANITIES AND SCIENCES. INITIALLY HE HAD CALLED FOR UNIFYING THE "OLD" UNIVERSITY WITH THE POLYTECHNIC (NOW THE "NEW" UNIVERSITY) AND TO HAVE THIS UNIFIED INSTITUTION GRANT ONLY FUNCTIONAL (I.E. JOB-RELATED) DEGREES. THOSE OPPOSED (PRIMARILY THE NATIONALIST PARTY AND ITS SUPPORTERS) TO THESE REFORMS CLAIM MINTOFF HAS DESTROYED UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND INJECTED POLITICS INTO HIGHER EDUCATION. THOSE WHO FAVOR HIS POSITION SAY THAT NOW EVERYONE WILL HAVE AN EQUAL CHANCE AT HIGHER EDUCATION AND THAT GRADUATES WILL BE ASSURED JOBS AFTER LEAVING THE UNIVERSITIES. WE RESERVE JUDGMENT AS TO WHICH VIEW WILL PROVE CLOSER TO BEING CORRECT; WHAT IS CLEAR, HOWEVER, IS THAT HIGHER EDUCATION HAS BEEN TREMENDOUSLY DISRUPTED BY THESE REFORMS.

- - THE AMENDMENT TO THE PRESS LAW CALLS FOR, INTER ALIA, STIFFER PENALTIES FOR THOSE JOURNALISTS WHO PUBLISH "FALSE NEWS". THE GOVERNMENT DREW A SHARP DISTINCTION BETWEEN PUBLICATION OF "OPINION" (I.E. CRITICISM) AND OF "FACTS" OR "NEWS". GOVERNMENT SPOKESMEN SAID THAT THE FORMER WAS PROTECTED BY THE CONSTITUTION AND THE AMENDMENT WOULD IN NO WAY AFFECT THIS RIGHT. THEY POINTED OUT THAT NEWS REPORTING, HOWEVER, BECAUSE OF ITS IMPORTANCE IN "EDUCATING THE PUBLIC" MUST BE DONE AS ACCURATELY AS CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 03 VALLET 02687 01 OF 04 211138Z POSS DUPE

POSSIBLE. THIS JOURNALISTIC RESPONSIBILITY HAD BEEN RECOGNIZED IN THE ORIGINAL PRESS ACT OF 1933 WHICH STIPULATED THAT JOURNALISTS WERE TO BE HELD RESPONSIBLE FOR WHAT THEY PRINT AND SHOW THAT THEY HAD TAKEN ALL REASONABLE STEPS TO VERIFY THEIR "FACTS", IF THE ACCURACY OF A NEWS REPORT WAS CHALLENGED; THE STIFFER PENALTIES MERELY SERVED TO REEMPHASIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF RESPONSIBLE NEWS REPORTING. THE OPPOSITION, WHILE AGREEING WITH THE IMPORTANCE OF ACCURATE REPORTING, COMPLAINED THAT IT WAS UNFAIR TO INSIST THAT A JOURNALIST ONLY PUBLISH WHAT HE COULD VERIFY, PARTICULARLY ON GOVERNMENT ACTIVITIES AS IT WAS OFTEN NOT EASY OR POSSIBLE AT ALL TO OBTAIN CONFIRMATION; THEREFORE THE REPORTER MUST RELY AT TIMES ON UNCONFIRMED REPORTS OR NOT REPORT AT ALL. (BUT THEY DID NOT SUGGEST REPEAL OF THIS PROVISION OF THE 1933 PRESS ACT.) IT IS STILL TOO SOON TO DETERMINE THE EFFECTS OF THIS LAW ON NEWS REPORTING BUT IT HAS HAD NO DISCERNIBLE IMPACT AS YET ON THE AMOUNT AND VIGOR OF PRESS CRITICISM OF EITHER THE GOVERNMENT OR THE OPPOSITION.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF PREVIOUS REFORMS - EFFECTS STILL
- UNCLEAR

- - FUSION OF THE GENERAL WORKERS UNION (GWU) AND THE MALTA LABOR PARTY (MLP) HAS BEEN FORMALLY RATIFIED BY BOTH GROUPS. MINTOFF AND HIS SUPPORTERS HAILED THIS FUSION AS A MAJOR STEP IN IMPROVING THE ABILITY OF THE WORKER TO INFLUENCE GOVERNMENT POLICY IN HIS FAVOR. THE NP, ON THE OTHER HAND, CHARGED THAT THE GWU SOLD OUT "FREE TRADE UNIONISM" BY BECOMING A CREATURE OF A POLITICAL PARTY AND THAT THE INDIVIDUAL WORKER HAS LOST RATHER THAN GAINED AS A RESULT. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FUSION, IF ANY, IS STILL

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PAGE 01 VALLET 02687 02 OF 04 220655Z

ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 NEA-10 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 02 OF 04 VALLETTA 02687

UNCLEAR PRIMARILY BECAUSE MINTOFF DOMINATES BOTH THE GWU AND THE MLP REGARDLESS OF THE NATURE OF ORGANIZATIONAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THEM. PROBABLY THE REAL TEST OF THE IMPACT OF FUSION ON DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES WILL NOT OCCUR UNTIL A NON-LABOR GOVERNMENT IS IN POWER; WILL THE MLP THEN TRY TO USE ITS NEW RELATIONSHIP WITH THE GWU FOR POLITICAL PURPOSES?

- - WORKER COMMITTEES ARE STILL BEING ORGANIZED AND NOT ENOUGH IS KNOWN AS YET ABOUT THEIR MEMBERSHIP AND OPERATIONS TO EVALUATE THEM REGARDING EITHER THEIR OBTEN- SIBLE PURPOSE OF INCREASING WORKER PARTICIPATION OR AS A POTENTIAL INSTRUMENT OF POLITICAL CONTROL. MANY OBSERVERS

ARE SKEPTICAL THAT THEY WILL EVOLVE INTO SIGNIFICANT VEHICLES FOR MEANINGFUL WORKER PARTICIPATION AND BELIEVE THAT THEY WILL ALMOST CERTAINLY CONFLICT WITH UNIONS. NEVERTHELESS, GOVERNMENT SPOKESMEN CONTINUE TO EMPHASIZE CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 VALLET 02687 02 OF 04 220655Z

THEIR SIGNIFICANCE IN PUBLIC PRONOUNCEMENTS.

4. NEW INITIATIVES - SOMEWHAT IN DOUBT

- - THE LABOR GOVERNMENT MAY PROPOSE TWO MAJOR NEW INITIATIVES WHEN PARLIAMENT REASSEMBLES - A NATIONAL HEALTH SCHEME AND ESTABLISHMENT OF NEIGHBORHOOD COMMITTEES. BOTH ARE IN DOUBT, HOWEVER. THE FUTURE OF A NATIONAL HEALTH SCHEME IS UNCERTAIN BECAUSE THE SO-CALLED DOCTOR'S STRIKE STILL CONTINUES WITH NO SIGN OF COMPROMISE FROM EITHER SIDE WHILE THE LABOR PARTY IS ITSELF DIVIDED ON THE WISDOM OF ESTABLISHING NEIGHBORHOOD COMMITTEES; SOME LABORITES FEAR SUCH COMMITTEES COULD DRAIN POWER AWAY FROM THEIR LOCAL PARTY CLUBS. WITH LEGISLATION ON EVEN THESE TWO BASIC LABOR PARTY PROPOSALS IN DOUBT IT SEEMS MOST UNLIKELY THAT MINTOFF WILL ATTEMPT ANY OTHER MAJOR REFORMS BETWEEN NOW AND MARCH, 1979 WHEN THE BRITISH BASE AGREEMENT TERMINATES. INSTEAD BOTH HE AND THE COUNTRY WILL BE SPENDING MOST OF THEIR TIME CONCENTRATING ON THE PROBLEMS MALTA MAY FACE AS A RESULT OF THE BASE CLOSURE.

5. THE OPPOSITION - VOCAL BUT NOT TOO EFFECTIVE

- - ACTIVE OPPOSITION TO MINTOFF COMES ALMOST ENTIRELY FROM THE NP, WHICH CONTINUES TO CHARGE HIM WITH ERODING BASIC DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS AND INDIVIDUAL LIBERTIES. IN ADDITION TO THE "EVIDENCE" OF THIS WHICH THEY HAVE ADDED IN THE PAST (SEE REFTEL), THEY HAVE RECENTLY ADDED LOSS OF UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY AND FURTHER RESTRICTION ON PRESS FREEDOM. THEY FEAR MATTERS WILL ONLY GET WORSE AS MINTOFF TRIES TO COPE WITH THE INCREASINGLY APPARENT FAILURE (AS THE NP SEES IT) OF HIS FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC POLICIES. EVEN IF THE NP IS SUCCESSFUL IN SHIFTING PUBLIC OPINION IN ITS FAVOR, HOWEVER, THIS SHIFT WILL ALMOST CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 03 VALLET 02687 02 OF 04 220655Z

CERTAINLY NOT BE REFLECTED IN PARLIAMENT UNTIL THE NEXT ELECTION (1981) BECAUSE, UNDER THE MALTESE ELECTORAL SYSTEM, THE ONLY WAY A CHANGE IN THE NUMBER OF MP'S SUPPORTING EACH PARTY CAN OCCUR BETWEEN GENERAL ELECTIONS IS BY MP'S CROSSING THE AISLE WHICH, GIVEN THE DEGREE OF

PARTY DISCIPLINE IN MALTA, IS HIGHLY UNLIKELY.

- - THE CHURCH, THE ONLY OTHER POTENTIAL SOURCE OF SIGNIFICANT OPPOSITION, RARELY ENGAGES IN POLITICAL DEBATE, EVEN CONCERNING THOSE ISSUES WHICH DIRECTLY AFFECT IT. THE CHURCH IS PROBABLY FOLLOWING THIS COURSE PARTLY AS A REACTION TO ITS HEAVY INVOLVEMENT IN POLITICS DURING THE 1950'S AND 1960'S WHICH, MOST OBSERVERS BELIEVE, DAMAGED ITS AUTHORITY AMONG THE MALTESE PEOPLE (AND HELPED MINTOFF) AND PARTLY BECAUSE THE VATICAN MAY BE LESS INCLINED TO SUPPORT POLITICAL ACTIVITIES BY THE CHURCH. MOREOVER, THE CURRENT ARCHBISHOP DOES NOT APPEAR TO HAVE A TASTE FOR POLITICAL BATTLES AND SEES HIMSELF INSTEAD AS BEING A PEACEMAKER IN A SHARPLY DIVIDED SOCIETY. THE ONLY STEP HE HAS TAKEN WHICH MIGHT BE CONSIDERED POLITICAL WAS TO ISSUE A PASTORAL LETTER IN WHICH HE DEPLORED THE INCREASE IN DIVISIVENESS IN MALTESE SOCIETY AND PLEADED FOR ALL MALTESE TO WORK TOWARD UNITY IN CHRISTIAN LOVE. THIS LETTER HAS NOT HAD MUCH IMPACT.

- - OTHER CENTERS OF OPPOSITION, SUCH AS THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY, THE NON-GWU UNIONS, ELEMENTS OF THE CIVIL SERVICE AND THE OPPOSITION PRESS, WHILE SPEAKING OUT ON VARIOUS ISSUES, HAVE ONLY A MARGINAL IMPACT ON THE LOCAL POLITICAL SCENE.

6. THE LAST SIX MONTHS - NO TRENDS DISCERNIBLE

CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 01 VALLET 02687 03 OF 04 220634Z
ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 NEA-10 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01
INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15
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AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI
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CONFIDENTIAL SECTION 03 OF 04 VALLETTA 02687

- - BASED ON MINTOFF'S PRONOUNCEMENTS AND POLICIES WE SEE LITTLE OR NO EVIDENCE OVER THE PAST SIX MONTHS TO SUPPORT THE CHARGE BY HIS OPPONENTS THAT MINTOFF IS SYSTEMATICALLY ERODING DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS AND INDIVIDUAL LIBERTIES, PARTICULARLY WHEN MINTOFF'S PERFORMANCE IS VIEWED IN THE CONTEXT OF MALTA'S HISTORICALLY ROUGH AND TUMBLE TYPE OF POLITICS. MINTOFF HAS PUBLICLY REITERATED HIS (AND THE MLP'S) FUNDAMENTAL COMMITMENT TO DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS AND COMPROMISED ON A MAJOR POINT IN HIS UNIVERSITY REFORM PROGRAM. IMPLEMENTATION OF THIS REFORM AS WELL AS THE AMENDMENT TO THE PRESS LAW AND HIS OTHER REFORMS NEEDS TO BE MONITORED BUT NONE IS INTRINSICALLY UNDEMOCRATIC. AS TO THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE JUDICIARY, THE COURTS FOUND AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT IN TWO CASES RECENTLY BOTH OF WHICH WERE SUFFICIENTLY EMBARRASSING POLITICALLY TO SUGGEST THAT THE COURTS STILL ENJOY A HIGH DEGREE OF AUTONOMY. WE KNOW OF NO CASES INVOLVING CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 02 VALLET 02687 03 OF 04 220634Z

POLICE INTIMIDATION NOR HAVE "GOON" SQUADS BEEN USED IN ANY SYSTEMATIC WAY - THERE HAVE BEEN TWO CASES WHEN ROUGH-HOUSE TACTICS WERE RESORTED TO BY MLP SUPPORTERS IN THE LAST SEVERAL MONTHS BOTH INVOLVING DISPUTES OVER UNIVERSITY REFORM. (OPPOSITION TO MINTOFF'S PROGRAM, HOWEVER, HAS BEEN ALMOST ENTIRELY NON-VIOLENT. THEREFORE HIS SUPPORTERS HAVE NOT HAD ANY JUSTIFICATION (EXCUSE) TO PLAY ROUGH ALTHOUGH SOME UNDOUBTEDLY WOULD LIKE TO.)

- - MINTOFF HAS NOT, ON THE OTHER HAND, SHOWN ANY INCLINATION TO MODERATE HIS AGGRESSIVE, ABRASIVE STYLE OF GOVERNING OR TO ENGAGE IN DIALOGUE WITH HIS OPPONENTS WITH A VIEW TO FINDING COMMON GROUND. THUS, WHILE HE MAY NOT BE AN ENEMY OF DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS AND PROCEDURES, HIS AUTHORITARIAN APPROACH TO GOVERNING, (WHICH HE JUSTIFIES AS CARRYING OUT THE WILL OF THE MAJORITY), CONTINUES TO MAKE HIM SUSCEPTIBLE TO THAT CHARGE.

7. MINTOFF - A MAJOR PROBLEM OF STYLE

- - IN A RECENT EDITORIAL, THE PRO-NATIONALIST SUNDAY TIMES OF MALTA PROBABLY SPOKE FOR MOST OF MINTOFF'S CRITICS WHEN IT ACCUSED HIM OF "ALOOF" LEADERSHIP WHICH, AS HE HAS GOTTEN OLDER, HAS BECOME LESS COMMUNICATIVE, MORE AUTHORITARIAN, LESS INCLINED TO HEED ADVICE AND MORE LIABLE TO GRAVE MISTAKES. THIS TYPE OF LEADERSHIP, CLAIMED THE EDITORIAL, HAS LED TO A DIVIDED NATION, LOSS

OF FRIENDS (INTERNATIONALLY) AND A NEED TO REFUTE CHARGES OF DECLINING DEMOCRACY IN MALTA. MINTOFF'S SUPPORTERS WERE QUICK TO RESPOND AND CHEERFULLY AGREED THAT HE IS A "STRONG, SELF-CONFIDENT" LEADER BECAUSE (ACCORDING TO THEM) EVENTS HAVE PROVED HIM RIGHT TIME AND AGAIN. THEY ASSERTED THAT THE MALTESE PEOPLE, Owing TO A CERTAIN SENSE OF CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 VALLET 02687 03 OF 04 220634Z

INFERIORITY, NEEDED A LEADER LIKE MINTOFF TO FREE THEM FROM THE DOMINANCE OF "THE FOREIGNER" AND FROM PRIVILEGED LOCAL GROUPS (CHURCH, UPPER CLASSES). THEY STRESSED THEIR RESENTMENT OF NP CHARGES THAT MINTOFF'S LEADERSHIP THREATENED DEMOCRACY IN MALTA, SAYING THAT, ASIDE FROM SUCH ASSERTIONS BEING SIMPLY WRONG, THEY ALSO WENT BEYOND LEGITIMATE CRITICISM IN A DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM AND ONLY SERVED TO DIVIDE THE NATION FURTHER.

- - AS WITH THE CASE OF MINTOFF'S POLICIES, AN ASSESSMENT OF HIS STYLE DEPENDS UPON THE POSITION OF THE INDIVIDUAL DOING THE ASSESSING. THE NATIONALISTS AND THEIR SUPPORTERS BELONG TO THOSE GROUPS WHICH ARE, BY AND LARGE, "LOSING" POWER AND INFLUENCE UNDER MINTOFF'S GOVERNMENT, WHICH MAKES THE ABRASIVE WAY IN WHICH HE IS BRINGING THESE CHANGES (REFORMS) ABOUT ALL THE MORE OFFENSIVE TO THEM. WHAT MINTOFF'S ULTIMATE MOTIVES ARE OBVIOUSLY ONLY HE KNOWS. BUT WE THINK IT WOULD BE WRONG TO SEE, AS HIS OPPONENTS SAY THEY DO, HIS REFORMIST DRIVE AND LIBERAL USE OF GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION IN PURSUIT OF THOSE REFORMS AS ONLY A COVER FOR SATISFYING A THIRST FOR PERSONAL POWER AND FOR PERPETUATING INDEFINITELY HIS PARTY IN GOVERNMENT. WE ARE MORE INCLINED TO BELIEVE THAT HE TRULY SEES HIMSELF AS DOING WHAT IS BEST FOR MALTA, THAT HE THINKS THE MAJORITY OF THE MALTESE PEOPLE AGREE WITH HIM, AND THAT CONSEQUENTLY HE HAS NO NEED TO SUPPRESS DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS AND BASIC FREEDOMS - HE WILL CONTINUE TO WIN ELECTIONS BASED ON HIS RECORD. ASSUMING THIS VIEW IS CORRECT, INCREASED USE OF GOVERNMENT AND CREATION OF NEW ORGANIZATIONAL INSTRUMENTS (WORKER COMMITTEES, NEIGHBORHOOD COMMITTEES, ETC.) ARE WAYS TO CARRY OUT REFORMS AND ACTIVATE THE AVERAGE MALTESE TO PARTICIPATE

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PAGE 01 VALLET 02687 04 OF 04 220637Z

ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 NEA-10 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01

INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15

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CONFIDENTIAL SECTION 04 OF 04 VALLETTA 02687

MORE IN THE AFFAIRS OF HIS COMMUNITY AND NATION RATHER
THAN MECHANISMS FOR CENTRALIZED CONTROL.

- - HAVING SAID THAT, HOWEVER, WE ALSO BELIEVE
MINTOFF WOULD BE WELL ADVISED TO HEED THE PLEA OF THE
ARCHBISHOP FOR ALL MALTESE TO WORK FOR GREATER UNITY. HE
COULD PROBABLY ACHIEVE MOST, IF NOT ALL, OF HIS OBJECTIVES
AT MUCH LESS COST TO MALTA'S TRANQUILITY AT HOME AND
REPUTATION ABROAD IF HE WOULD EMPLOY A LESS CONTENTIOUS,
LESS BELLIGERENT APPROACH TO GOVERNING. YET BASED ON HIS
PAST PERFORMANCE AND MALTA'S HIGHLY POLARIZED POLITICAL
ENVIRONMENT, IT IS MOST UNLIKELY THAT THE ARCHBISHOP'S
PLEA WILL HAVE MUCH EFFECT ON MINTOFF (OR HIS OPPONENTS).

8. OTHER MISSION VIEWS

- - OTHER ELEMENTS OF THE MISSION - THE DATT AND THE
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PAGE 02 VALLET 02687 04 OF 04 220637Z

PAO - WHILE AGREEING THAT DEMOCRACY STILL SURVIVES IN
MALTA, BELIEVE THAT MINTOFF HAS ERODED DEMOCRATIC INSTITU-
TIONS IN A DELIBERATE ATTEMPT TO CONCENTRATE AND PERPET-
UATE POWER IN MLP/GWU (I.E. MINTOFF'S) HANDS. THEY SEE
BOTH HIS "REFORMS" AND HIS STYLE OF GOVERNING AS SUPPORT-
ING THIS ASSESSMENT OF HIS LONG-RUN INTENTIONS AND IF HE
IS STILL GOVERNING CONSTITUTIONALLY, THIS IS MAINLY
BECAUSE HE LACKS THE STRENGTH TO DISPENSE WITH THE TRAPPING
OF DEMOCRACY. WILSON

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